

It is good to be back in the building, though you're not here, and we are in a time of two crises. Several weeks ago, due to the Covid pandemic, I felt like God was leading me to do a series on loving your neighbor. The idea was that our neighborhoods have come to life and that there is such an opportunity for us to be salt and light to those who live around us. While we will get to that idea in a few weeks, I feel compelled to go in a different direction. Thankfully God knew what he was doing.

We are at the end of what has been a painful couple of weeks. The death of George Floyd has ignited pains and passions, and our nation is in turmoil. We are leaning in, saying this isn't the way it's supposed to be, and demanding change. But the only way change comes about is when we are clear on the problem. The issues unfolding before our eyes started before Minneapolis, before the founding of America, before people even looked different. It started in a Garden, a horrific moment influenced by the schemes of the enemy of God and man who is still very much active today, brought about by the rebellion of our first ancestors against God, and culminating in a murderous brother who asked the cynical, divisive, and loveless question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" What has followed is centuries of division, hatred, and violence between many different groups of people of many different colors.

That's the bad news. But there's good news too. If this problem is first and foremost spiritual, the solution begins there as well. And if the solution is spiritual, guess who has the answer? The Church. That means we have the opportunity and the responsibility to live out that solution in plain sight. Here's the solution Jesus gave us 2,000 years ago:

**[Matthew 22:36-40] <sup>36</sup> "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" <sup>37</sup> And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. <sup>38</sup> This is the great and first commandment. <sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. <sup>40</sup> On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."**

Jesus' answer is what is known as the Great Commandment; that we would love God with everything we are, and we would love our neighbor as our self. It is a command found in the Old Testament Law, reiterated by Jesus multiple times, and highlighted throughout the New Testament. That means the Church is as much a Great Commandment people as we are a Great Commission people, and everything we do should be informed by this Commandment, particularly in times like these. We can only love God and our neighbor because God loved us first, and love for God is best expressed by loving our neighbor. If we are to fulfill our calling as ambassadors for Christ, representatives of God's Kingdom, and co-creators with God of a culture centered on the Gospel that recognizes the infinite worth of all men and causes a broken and fallen world to sit up and take notice, it starts with the people of God living by this command.

In order to live it out, though, we need to know who our neighbor is and how we should love them. Someone asked Jesus about that one day, and the answer Jesus gave him is the answer he gives us all. This morning I want to talk about where I believe loving our neighbor begins, and next week we'll talk about what it leads to. I am confident that, if we love our neighbor like Jesus tells us to love our neighbor, we will begin to see the change we so desire.

**[Luke 10:29-33] 29 But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” 30 Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion.”**

A man asked Jesus “Who is my neighbor?” His question was intended to limit his responsibility and justify himself, but Jesus used it to blow up his paradigm and call him to an expanded life of love. He told the story of a man going from Jerusalem to Jericho who is robbed, beaten, and left for dead. Two men, a priest and then a Levite, walk by this man. They see him but they do not stop. In fact, the text suggests they went to the other side of the road to avoid him. They saw the suffering, but they kept going. And then comes along the Samaritan. He sees the man, he stops, and we’re told he had compassion on the man. This is where loving our neighbor starts.

Compassion is defined as sympathetically entering into someone else’s pain. It is more than observation or even acknowledgement. It means you are personally affected by it. Jesus uses a Greek word for compassion that is based on a noun for “inward parts”. The belief of the day was that the pit of the stomach was the seat of emotions. So Jesus is saying compassion occurs when the pain of others hits you in the gut. It’s only when we stop, see our neighbor’s suffering, and allow ourselves to feel compassion, that we will be compelled to loving action.

Compassion is a God-given and God-modeled response. In Matthew we read about Jesus having compassion for a great crowd because they were like sheep without a shepherd. Those who were to lead and care for them instead oppressed and abused them, and it hit Jesus in the gut. When we look at those who are suffering like God looks at those who are suffering, our response will be the same. Loving your neighbor starts with seeing your neighbor and doing so with a willingness to be moved by their circumstances.

That’s what I want to do with the rest of our time. I could continue by telling you a bunch of stories of the pain and suffering of our black brothers and sisters, but I don’t think that would be very effective. Instead, this past Friday I had the opportunity to speak to a few members of our congregation about how they are impacted by current events, what they experience on a consistent basis, and what they hope for our church family. My prayer is that you would stop, see them the way God sees them, and be willing to feel it in your gut.

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I don't know where you are on all of this, but I do pray you grow in your compassion for what is happening with many of our members. I want to encourage two things this week and in the weeks to come.

**Stop, see, and feel.** This is a time to humble ourselves and listen to what is going on with those in our family. Be willing to engage, read, talk, learn and step into the pain of someone else. The elders will be watching and discussing the documentary *The 13th* together over the next few weeks. I'm also reading *The Third Option*. Also don't presume to know what is in someone's heart. That's being judgmental. Ask and learn. You may be surprised what you hear.

**Receive with grace.** Kraig mentioned this in the interview, but I want to reiterate how important this is. If you are approached to tell your story by a person with a genuine heart, honor their effort and receive them with grace, knowing that the heart that asks has been eternally changed by God. It may be clumsy, awkward, painful, and even challenging, but those moments are full of opportunity. Unity, healing, and reconciliation are two-way streets, and you have a significant part to play in being used by God to help bring about those things.

Above all, love God, because apart from him we can do nothing. We have the opportunity to show the world the difference Jesus makes and how lives and cultures are changed by his Gospel. Let us step into this moment as the people of God and show the world the solution they are so desperate for.